

The Presentation of Identity in Museum Culture

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The study of material culture is often affiliated with that of museum studies, both of which, comparatively speaking, are relatively young disciplines that have the ability to alter the personal identities and affiliations of global audiences. The initial intent behind the creation of these disciplines were to create categories to marginalize and hierarchize cultures that were of non-Western origin at the "height of their primitivism" and compare them to that of the highly evolved culture of European society. As this ideology was dominant for quite some time, it became prevalent for museums as well as individuals to create a distinction between the "self" and the "other". While the implementation of this ideology has gradually fallen out of favor, contemporary academics have not only had to salvage the reputation of non-Western cultures by educating others to view them in a more objective manner, they must adjust the field to fit the possible ideologies of the future. For many, Bourdieu is vital to understanding the past as a way to prepare for the future and yet, they should not be satisfied with the mere identification of a problem. Understandably, there are many factors that must be carefully considered prior to potentially applying programs that Bourdieu alone cannot contribute; by utilizing the work of anthropologists like Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Lila Abu-Lughod, the system of collection, preservation, curation, and interpretation of the future may have the potential to benefit all. In this paper, I will attempt to highlight the milestones of museum and material culture in chronological order while addressing the concerns of modern academics using Bourdieu, Scheper-Hughes, and Abu-Lughod to prepare for where the discipline could head in the future.

To understand the present, we must first look to the past. The modern assumption that those of the ancient world were defined by identity, culture, and ethnicity is inapplicable because the assumption is made based on modern understandings of these topics. These identities may be "defined as the collection aspect of the set of characteristics by which something or someone is recognizable or known," (Hodos 2010: 3) with ethnicity being the "buildup of personal and social identity" (Hodos 2010: 3). Culture itself represents "a coherent system of values, norms, and habits that, through repetition, engender a sense of unfilled belonging, individually and collectively, over time" (Hodos 2010: 3). This sense of collective similarities regardless of object or individuals, implies that "the very notion of identity also depends upon opposition through contrast with something else" (Hodos 2010: 3). For the ancients, their identity was bounded locally, not globally. Habitual and repetitive behavior of local culture created a sense of belonging but also allowed for a sense of distinction that created the other. According to Pearce, "many societies have defined themselves explicitly by contrast with others" (1989: 24). For example, the Greeks identified themselves from others based on language, for those who could not speak Greek were a barbaros. The initial study of identities of past civilizations has its origins in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Romantics who were trying to discover their own sense of nationalism by using the Greeks and Romans as inspirations to

reinvent themselves. However, this was further tainted by the culmination of Darwinian evolutionary thinking that there was a biological inequality between groups. This later came to cover cultural differences between Western and non-Western societies because many believed that natural selection accounted for biological evolution to allow some to utilize culture while others weren't. This would also allow for the justification of European control to "promote the general progress of the human species by advancing Western ideals" (Hodos 2010:6). That being said, "romanticism and modernism defined ideas of identity, not only going back to nationalism and racialism but also, via psychoanalysis, by defining for the Western white audience a sense of self and other, of identity and identification" (Hodos 2010:6). This is not a justification for an exclusive way of thinking, but identity formation is complex and the capacity for change is also available for the future.

Prior to arriving at both private and public museums by the 1850s, artifacts were divided into two groups: "artificial curiosities" (Pearce 1989: 3) and fine art, which included the standard paintings and sculptures as well as ceramics, fine metalwork, and coins. The accumulation of these pieces were by no means systematic, but they were expected to be "high quality" pieces that had the "finest design and craftsmanship of their kind" (Pearce 1989: 3). This practice was altered by the creation of a general classification system by Augustus Pitt-Rivers which was based on typology, rather than geography or where they were found. Like many of his colleagues, Pitt-Rivers was partial to Darwinian evolution however, his material was "not for the purpose of surprising anyone, either by the beauty or the value of the objects exhibited, but solely with a view to instruction" (Daniel 1950: 171). Despite the widespread application of his ideas, the influence of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski in the period between 1914 and 1950 further overcame the field by applying a functionalist approach concentrating on the detailed studies of single societies through which it could be seen as a self-sufficient whole. Individual artifacts no longer had the capacity to be more than their material use, they were dismissed as 'simply the outcome of social processes and gave them little significance in their own right' (Pearce 1989: 4). Subsequently, it was Gordon Childe who popularized the combination of the historical approach with that of Pitt-Rivers which valued the use of spatial distribution to produce a relative dating. There was still a prevalence of studying material culture through fixed, singular structures but its prioritizations of museum culture led to corresponding displays.

Through the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of structuralism, led by Levi-Strauss became the dominant standard with which artifact interpretation and material culture came to be studied by. Currently, much material culture seems to arrive in collections as the result of three processes, giving the artifacts the label of either souvenirs, fetishes, or collections. Again, "in practice the motives behind their accumulation are frequently mixed, but the underlying strands may be distinguished" (Pearce 1989:6). Souvenirs are loosely defined as artifacts that may have been preserved because they represent the starting point for a personal narrative and the tangible essence of a past experience (Pearce 1989: 7). They are also romantic in nature, as there is an underlining nostalgia which suggests that the past was better than the present. As they are intensely personal artifacts with a singular interpretation, it is very difficult to display them because they are separate pieces that tend to remain separate. Fetishes, as used by Marx and Freud, are artifacts that are "given meanings beyond their original ones by individuals or societies, who pass their own emotional needs over to the objects concerned" (Pearce 1989: 7). As they tend not to have historical links, these artifacts are deliberately acquired because they

can be used to justify the desires of an individual. The personal and public collections acquired during the Renaissance and the post-Renaissance are examples of fetishes and although the intellectual basis behind Romanticism and Hellenism have been discredited, they are still collected and displayed in modern museums although, their mode belongs to the archaic phase” (Pearce 1989: 8). Led by Pitt-Rivers, collections have an internal coherence which went beyond the accumulation of samples and were not complete until curators could gather artifacts from each category. These interpretations have changed over the years which is indicative of the alterations we are willing to make on global thought processes. Now that the basic background for material culture and museum studies has provided a general framework for identity and affiliation formation, it is now important to discuss the nature of modern cultures of display. The notion that, “Our material culture reveals our spending power, it reinforces our sense of gender and age group, it emphasizes the cultural affiliations we hold, and sets them out for other people to see our social status,” (Hurcombe 2007: 3) is one that will be discussed later in this paper.

During my research, it was apparent that there were many concerns, theoretical and physical, that could not be answered that pertain to different aspects of this field of study, but I thought it important to mention nonetheless as it impacts both the present and future for multiple fields as well as marginalized groups of people. Firstly, Pearce mentioned a concern that the current standard for valid collecting policies has become a daunting task because "we must recognize that the collectible material culture of past societies is finite and should sometimes be left undisturbed for those who will come after with superior techniques" (1989: 8). Not only will this affect current museum practices and cultures of display, this will directly impact the archaeological field tremendously. Traditionally as a field that is associated with the past, one tends to forget how our actions will then impact the future. If we are able to establish a controlled field, how would it impact our current understanding of material culture? Similarly, there is a concern that the mass-consumerism of the twentieth century being labeled as material culture provides problems for how we preserve items that “are reminiscent of an almost forgotten youth,” (Pearce and Jenkins: 1989 119) which we have kept for nostalgic purposes. Jenkins claims that “the preservation and conservation of historically important buildings, sites, and artefacts is, of course, vital, but has the conservation movement gone too far” (1989: 120)? He continues by pondering the value of the things we preserve, which is a viable concern as we are focused on fixing the past but not conserving for the future. However, how are we able to judge what will be deemed important in the future? The rate at which we are changing physically, mentally, and culturally, is something that has to be taken into consideration without neglecting the past.

For Abu-Lughod, her argument in “Writing Against Culture” is that the notion of culture creates a divide between the anthropologist (or in this case, curators as well as academics) and the subject, the self-versus the other, and that it establishes a structure that disregards marginalized communities. In museums, curators become the mediators in the relations of consumption because the “curator both extends and constricts the public's opportunities to obtain what has been, hitherto, only curatorial knowledge” (Pearce 1989: 76) and as recognized specialists, “the public expression of knowledge, therefore, is part of the productive relations of museums, as institutions, and of their curators, as servants of these institutions” (Pearce 1989: 75). The public is forced to trust the curator as all-knowing and in line with Foucault's post structuralist theory, “the relationship of the professional curator to the public, and the balance of

power within such a relationship raises questions about “Whose history? and ‘Produced for whom?’ (Pearce 1989:9). Perhaps we are stuck in a cycle of marginalization. Major museums around the world still have the expectation of being better, of being a representative of a country's cultural wealth. As Pearce has pointed out, the production of knowledge from the past are “selected from the large range of possible choices by individuals who acted in light of their own ideologies, conscious and unconscious” (1989:9). Every source I read had similar concerns, but it seems important to repeat to those privileged enough to determine the identities of themselves and others that this discipline, like many others, was “built on the historically constructed divide between the West and the non-West” (Abu-Lughod 1991: 139).

Despite the relative ease of acknowledging individual biases, it is also important to note that the origin of museum studies stemmed from Romantic notions of projecting our desires through exhibition. Not only are they representative of an ideological personal identity, they are also forms of cultural production. According to Fred Myers, “What was collected, selected, and exhibited constructs a framework for the representation of people, their culture, their history” (38). The use of primitivism as a form of power to producing and sustaining a distinct Western identity has come at a detrimental cost to marginalized communities. Critics have argued that exhibitions subject others to representative “traps” and has power over their identities; if they are to continue using indigenous artifacts, natives should have the option of creating a production of value for themselves. We must also learn to look beyond the confines of “a hierarchy in the making,” of appropriation- of “two distinctly defined groups with no relation to the other” (Myers 2008: 44) because the subject realizes that this apparently alien other is in fact a product of itself, created as a mirror by means of which the subject might further his or her own self-awareness” (Myers 2008: 21). These identities are created through sustained social performances which become legitimized over time through repetition In terms of material culture, “the culture gives rise to and from the material. Thus, material and visual cultures embody strategies of communication that may be articulated and mediated through shared cultural codes” (Hodos 2010: 19).

While Scheper-Hughes wrote “The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology” for anthropologists to become more ethically grounded and constantly questions, “What makes anthropology and anthropologists exempt from the human responsibility to take an ethical (and even a political) stand on the working out of historical events as we are privileged to witness them?” (1995: 411), it ties with Abu-Lughod's argument especially because they both criticize the lack of action as “a lapse in moral courage by those empowered to protect the well-being of the social body...” (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 410) and explain that “anthropologists as witnesses are accountable for what they see and what they fail to see, how they act and how they fail to act in critical situations” (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 419). Myers notes that, “Historically, it has been the poor, the mad, children, animals, and the “lower” order of humankind who are revealed to by being exposed to view,” (49) in which we only have ourselves to blame. This meaning is created and ascribed from ourselves to ourselves. I believe this to be especially true with human remains displayed in museums; as with the popularity of “slumming” in the early twentieth century, our fascination with human remains calls into question the ethical and moral obligations we must afford one another. This “social pornography” (Kirsheblatt-Gimblett 1991: 49)- the private made public, “generates a voyeuristic excitement...in a convergence of moral adventure, social exploration, and sensation seeking, the inner city is constructed as a socially

distant but physically proximate exotic-and erotic- territory” (Kimblatt-Gimblett 1991b: 413). Although we prize and exoticize the remains of Native Americans, we flaunt our social power by both offering and denying them a pedestal in death which we deny to them in life. As Westerners, we praise ourselves in life as we do to marginalized communities in death and yet, there is never an issue when it comes to our bodies being dug up and subsequently placed in a museum. As archaeologists, as anthropologists, as curators, as academics, as human beings, in our pursuit of higher knowledge, we cannot forget that we are tethered to society and our responsibility lies not just with ourselves but with the wider public as well. We owe due diligence to both the living and the dead, animate and inanimate objects, to those we perceive as self and other.

Again, I believe this responsibility is applicable to everyone involved, more so for those with an anthropological background but this is not my biggest issue with the discipline. Understandably, a discussion must be facilitated for people to acknowledge there is a problem and my sources have excepted the blame for their predecessor's mistakes and have brought up valid points that could impact how we see material cultures, especially those from marginalized communities through time but there appears to be no progress. This topic should be handled with care; however, it is infuriating to watch the lack of progress in the things that appear straightforward. Understandably, there are political, legal, and financial limitations but as Pearce mentioned, time is moving fast. What we consider as the incontrovertible truth may not be so in the future. Ideas change, people change, as we've seen from the various theories presented since the discipline's creation. How we perceived ourselves in the past is no longer how we see ourselves in the present and I imagine that it will not be the same in the future. The complications surrounding modern national identity, repatriation, and the culture of display will be difficult to resolve but if we continue to endlessly argue over old problems, our exploration and acceptance of identities will become a burden.

On the other hand, without the application of social power and symbolic capital, what will become of museums and the artifacts that lie within? There is an expectation that once out of the ground, there is a brief period where only a small group of people come in contact with them before they are relocated to a more secure facility. By constantly restricting access, these objects gain immediate status as venerated objects because of where they are placed, how they are handled, and who is able to work with them” (Hurcombe 2014: 36-37). The concept of value changes from an individual, to a local, to a national basis and yet, artifacts are not just mere objects but physical expressions of “people’s needs, capabilities, and aspirations” (Hurcombe 2014: 3). We use them to build social personae. We use them to see people in their social contexts. We also use them to create new meaning and value to our everchanging society. That is why we must be cautious of taking artifacts out of their original contexts and imbuing them with so much cultural meaning that they become "dense”. According to Weiner, this “denseness accrues through an object's association with its owner's fame, ancestral histories, secrecy, sacredness, and aesthetic and economic values” (9). Once this occurs, “people covet them as prized collectibles, “art,” or ancestral relics” (Weiner 2008:9). Rare objects are also more highly prized because they cannot be replaced. Especially in a museum culture system, they lose ethnicity and cultural value after they are assigned new meaning due to our blurring of the boundary between high and low culture with our attempts at turning commodities into inalienable possessions (Myer 2014: 10).

Despite the loss of cultural value once they enter a museum, they are bestowed with a different sort of value by visitors, who would not go out of their way to see something meaningless. Hurcombe states that because people, as well as objects and material culture, are in a constant state of flux, they have the ability to “reinforce, reinvent, and renegotiate social relationships between people” (103). Thus, we should try to move away from the framework of objects as cultures to objects as the material remains of human activity (Hurcombe 2014: 99). Despite the best efforts of capitalism, these artifacts “offer value that cannot be reduced to economics” (Myer 2014: 12).

The theoretical framework presented by other academics already addresses why material culture and museum studies is important for things like identity formation, but it does not seem like they have any viable solutions ready for implementation because they are focused on controlling the damage caused by our predecessors. Like my sources, I agree with using Bourdieu as a modern precursor to understanding these fields to better educate ourselves and our audiences but I disagree with the pace with which we are considering our options. This is a complex topic with centuries worth of problematic thinking that was appropriate for the time and we are on the right track of understanding why it was wrong and trying to rectify our mistakes, but the world is rapidly changing and without immediate action, these mistakes could cause more harm.

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